It is easy to think that learning a new language involves merely the learning of words and grammar rules. Language, however, is more than information and skills. Words are deeply connected with who we are. We can use words to bless and to curse. With words we can encourage and criticize, thank and reject. Our words can inspire others, and they can lead them astray. Our relationships and the kinds of people we become are shaped by the ways we speak (and don’t speak) to others. As the biblical book of Proverbs puts it, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21).

It is not hard to think of examples from everyday life that show the spiritual and moral power of words. But are these concerns relevant to the language classroom, where the words students use are very limited as the students work at mastering the mechanics of language? This textbook series is based on the conviction that faith and virtue are indeed bound together with language instruction. Here are three ways in which the language teacher’s job is not just a task involving grammar, but one involving moral and spiritual concepts:

First, teachers are model speakers for students. This is obviously true in terms of the sounds and structures of the language. Language teachers work to improve their pronunciation and command of structure so that they can present the new language clearly and accurately to students. Beyond this, however, teachers model a way of treating others through words. Students will soon notice if a teacher’s words are gentle or harsh, encouraging or sarcastic. They will soon become aware if the teacher speaks positively of some students but disdainfully of others. Teachers are called to love all their students, and one of the chief ways they do this is through their words. This responsibility remains true in a second language, and many lessons in this series give teachers opportunities to speak affirming, encouraging words to students or in front of students. Our hope is that teachers will model a gracious use of words.

Second, teachers are models not just in how they speak, but also in what they say and do not say. By thanking someone aloud for a gift, we communicate not only our own gratitude but our belief that thankfulness matters. If we use words to give instructions but never to express delight, we are implying that learning is about duty but not about joy. Perhaps we use words to describe and report and complain, but never to pray. Maybe we talk about colors and animals and clothes, but never about God. Or we let students say they are sorry, but we do not express forgiveness. In each case, we send messages about what we consider important enough to talk about. Many lessons in this series include opportunities to pray with and for students, and to tell stories that begin to address, in simple ways, questions of faith.

Third, when we teach a new language and encourage students to begin using it themselves, our choices as teachers help to guide their sense of who they can be through their words. This is perhaps especially true of very young children. What are we implying if we teach students how to say they are sick, but not how to comfort someone who is unwell? Or if we teach them to say what they would want and what they like, but not to talk about how they can serve others? Or if we teach them to name the objects in their world, but not to share them or to express thankfulness for them? Or if we teach them to pray? We would be teaching lessons in selfishness. In this series we have tried to enable students to talk in their new language in ways that express care, gratitude, kindness, wonder, and openness to others. Learning to speak in this way helps students in their moral and spiritual growth.

We believe, then, that the language classroom is a place of moral and spiritual as well as linguistic learning, and that the language teacher should work with this in mind. We would like to add two cautions.

First, do not think of the moral moments in your classroom as only those moments when you are teaching moral rules or telling students what is right. Similarly, do not think of the spiritual moments as only those in which prayers are said or God is mentioned. Keep your eyes open for all the ways in which students can learn to experience joy as well as comfort, to speak and be spoken to kindly, to bless and forgive, to celebrate the good things in creation. All of our life is lived before God, and in all things we are called to love our neighbors. Your classroom can be a place where students learn this truth in small but consistent ways each day.
Second, be careful not to let the moral and spiritual focus live only in your words. It is good for your students to hear you praying for them, but it is also good for them to pray. And though it is good for you to remind them how we should treat one another or how we should be thankful, this reminder could turn into empty words if students are not then given an opportunity to actually help one another or to report back on how they served a neighbor. They need to be allowed to express thankfulness for things they love. Look for those lesson sections in which students can express their own growing moral and spiritual selves in simple words. Your calling is not just to teach, and your students’ calling is not just to listen. Together you and your students can live your love of God and neighbor each day.

Death and life are in the power of the tongue. We pray that these lessons and your care for your students will help your English class be a place where students experience and act on the life-giving potential of a new language.